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Our Universities: A Canary in the Mine

The future of higher education is intertwined with the future of the economic health of our states and nation. The two are inseparable, and our universities are barometers. We need to face challenges head on.

“The problem is not that there are problems. The problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having problems is a problem.”

Theodore Rubin

Jodi S. Cohen and Alex Richards posted a piece in the **Chicago Tribune** last week, *“Illinois Share of Students at U of I Continues to Decline.”* Reportedly, a decade ago 90% of the freshmen at U of I called Illinois home. Currently, in-staters number 73% of the beanie-wearing class, 2% less than the University goal of 75%.

The reporters have spotted an important “canary in the coal mine.” The birds were used to proclaim the presence of poisonous vapors. When they died, it meant “get the hell out,” to borrow Gov. Chris Christie’s admonition. Similarly, the in-state enrollment decline at the U of I is one of many indicators that universities are choking on their civic commitment as catalysts for growth. Moon shots, the internet, biomedical technology, personal computers, cell phones, and airbags, are examples of economic progress nurtured by ideas — the matrimony of education and commerce — during the second half of the last century.

Cohen and Richards suggest that the universities are accepting out-of-state students because visiting scholars pay full fare...no discounts. Conscientiously, university leaders may be working to balance the books in difficult fiscal times.

Yes, freshmen are going out of state. Illinois is a significant exporter of college students. Why do Illinois families send progeny to out-of-state institutions? Do families and students see wheezing canaries? The “mind-flight” of Illinois’ students is beginning to rival the dire distinction held by the national leader, Chris Christie’s New Jersey.

A covey of canaries offers a glimpse of the contracting impact Illinois has on the nation’s economy through diminished knowledge production.

Could it be that, according to the **National Science Foundation**, the Illinois decline in total research and development expenditures per capita is not keeping pace with national trends? NSF says that in 2000 Illinois ranked 23rd, sliding to 26th 5 years later. That’s a coughing canary.

Perhaps parents and students see the declines in per capita income from 13th to 15th, from 2005 to 2010, according to the **U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis**. Unsurprisingly, median family income dropped 3 spots, 14th to 17th, from 2000 to 2010. Families sending sons and daughters out of state may believe that it's in the best interests of their children to study in another state in the hope of eventually working there. Such markers may be a sign of decreasing quality. Birds in flight?

According to the **National Council of Education Statistics** (NCES), credentials and degrees awarded per \$100,000 of state, local, and tuition revenues dropped from 38th in 2005 to 46th in 2010. In other words Illinoisans are getting less “bang-for-the-buck.”

Six-year graduation rates, a good indicator to time-to-degree completion, are falling according to the **Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System** (IPEDS). Additionally retention rates for first-time college freshmen returning to their second year, an important measure of persistence, dropped from 10th to 18th nationally.

Alarming, in the rate of change for undergraduate degrees awarded in 2005, according to the NCES completion survey, Illinois ranked 3rd nationally in the number of degrees awarded to undergraduates, but by 2010 dropped to 28th.

From 2000 to 2010 Illinois unemployment rates rose from 32nd at 4.4% to 8th at 10.5% according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, affecting all Illinoisans and every facet of Illinois' economy. Not a canary but a circling vulture.

Chicken-lickin'? Maybe Cohen's and Richard's canary is a single bird, but there is a flock gasping for breath.

Institutional and elected leadership are stewards of the quality and efficacy of higher education. Student and family's desire for education has never been higher. And for Illinois — a former national leader in higher education attainment, cost effectiveness and efficiency — to fritter that leadership away is a costly cultural and economic tragedy.

Our universities should not look the other way while chicks flee the nest.